

Influences on College Relationships: Staying Together or Breaking Up?



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Introduction:

This study explores long-term dating relationships among college students. Previous research is plentiful on the study of relationship quality, relationship commitment, and relationship dissolution; however most research is focused on relationships within marital or cohabiting relationships among older adults. While some may argue that "dating" among college students is a temporary arrangement with few consequences following a break-up, we argue that the study of dating may be more important today since college students could potentially be in these relationships for a significant period of their lives.



Theoretical Background:

Role Model Theory

- Individual's decisions are influenced by those around them
- Witnessing a breakup would create greater doubt in the future of their own relationship

Social Learning

- Due to learned gender roles, men and women may have different expectations for relationships
- Men and women learn different styles and skills for interacting with others including conflict resolution.

Social Exchange

- Cost-benefit analysis of relationships
- Uses a subjective standard to evaluate if exchange meets expectations

Research Questions:

- ❖ Under what circumstances would individuals be more willing to end their relationship? Are there gender differences?
- ❖ Are individual's views of their own relationships influenced by observing a close friend experience a break up?

Methods and Participants

We utilized a convenience sample of 71 students from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Data was collected through anonymous survey distributed through email. All participants were in a heterosexual relationship for at least 6 months.

Sample:

- ❖ 19.7% male and 80.3% Female
- ❖ Freshman 5.6%, Sophomore 14.1%, Junior 28.2%, Senior 52.1%
- ❖ Exclusivity of relationship
 - Exclusively seeing each other 97.2%
 - Mostly exclusively seeing each other 1.4%
 - Not exclusively seeing each other 1.4%
- ❖ Current or previous cohabitation with current significant other:
 - Yes 21.1% No 78.9%
- ❖ Length of relationship
 - 6-12 months 30.9%
 - 13-18 months 11.3%
 - 19-24 months 11.3%
 - More than 2 years 46.5%



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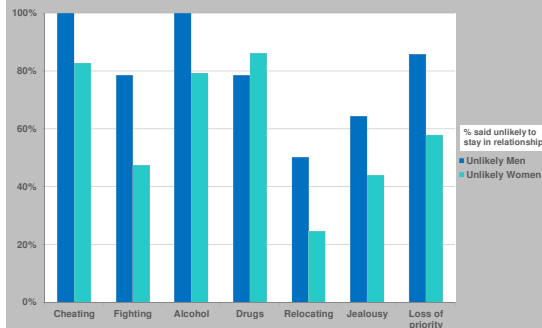
Would men and women breakup under the same circumstances?

In order to investigate potential differences between men and women's attitudes towards relationship breakups, participants were asked to decide how likely (ranged from very unlikely to very likely) they would continue in their current relationship if they were given the following hypothetical situations:

- Your significant other cheats*
- You fight about the same issue over and over*
- Drinking becomes an issue for your significant other*
- Drugs becomes an issue for your significant other*
- You or your partner relocates (long distance)*
- Your significant other becomes jealous*
- You feel you have become less of a priority in your significant other's life*



Figure 1: Comparison of men and women's reasons to breakup



- ❖ Men appear less likely to continue in a relationship in comparison to women in all but one scenario
- ❖ Women appear more likely than men to stay in a relationship if their significant other has a drinking problem, but they are less likely than men to stay in a relationship if their partner has a drug problem.

A chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between gender and likelihood of staying together in a relationship for each hypothetical situation. The relationship between gender and **fighting about the same issue over and over** was significant $\chi^2(1, N=71)=4.399, p=.036$

Chi-square analyses are very sensitive to sample size and we have a small sample size. Given the observed % differences between men and women, we believe it may be reasonable to increase the alpha level to .10. Then, gender becomes significantly associated with 4 additional scenarios: **you feel you have become less of a priority in your significant other's life** $\chi^2(1, N=71)=3.748, p=.053$; **drinking becomes an issue for your significant other** $\chi^2(1, N=71)=3.547, p=.060$; **you or your partner relocates** $\chi^2(1, N=71)=3.492, p=.062$; and **your significant other cheats** $\chi^2(1, N=71)=2.859, p=.091$.

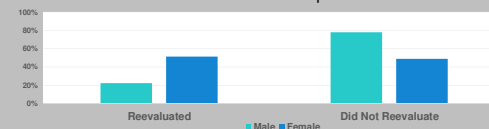
Influence of others

Effect of friend's relationship break-up:

Participants were asked, "Do you have a close friend who has experienced a serious relationship breakup within the last two year?" 69% said "yes" and were asked an open-ended follow-up question, "Has this experience encouraged you to reevaluate your own relationship?"



Figure 2: Reevaluation of Relationship Based on Witnessing Friend's Breakup



Interestingly, several comments said that they were now more appreciative of their relationship having seen their friend's break-up.

- ❖ "Yes. It has made me appreciate my own relationship more and made me see what I want and don't want in a significant other"
- ❖ "I can see how important it is to be happy with the relationship, but more importantly happy with myself. Seeing her loss made me happy for my own relationship."



We also asked, "What is the likelihood that you will pursue another relationship or a single life in the near future?" and examined the influence a friend breakup.

	Friend did not experience a break-up	Friend did have a serious break-up
Likely to pursue a single life or another relationship in near future	9.5%	24%
Unlikely	90.5%	76.0%

From chi-square analysis, variables that were significantly associated with the likelihood of leaving the current relationship in the near future were:

- ❖ Sharing less similar values*
- ❖ Sharing in less leisure activities*
- ❖ Being in the relationship for ≤ 12 months*
- ❖ Less family approval of relationship**
- ❖ Less friend approval of relationship*
- ❖ Less approval from significant other's family**
- ❖ Less approval from significant other's friends*

**p<.01
*p<.05

Discussion

- Men's and women's reasoning about whether to stay or leave a relationship appear different. Men may be more willing to leave a relationship with issues. It would be interesting to explore further whether this is due to differences in conflict management; women are more communicative about relationship issues and initiate discussions about relationship problems which may factor in their decision making.
- Friends and family do influence relationships; their approval of one's significant other is important. While a friend's breakup may lead to relationship reevaluation, it does not appear to lead to breakup. Interestingly, many respondents said it made them value what they have. According to social exchange theory, people do use observations of other's relationship in their own relationship evaluation; if a friend has a bad relationship, they may feel better about their own.
- Dating is a normative aspect of college life and more research should be conducted in this area with larger sample sizes.

Sources

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